

*** NETANSWERS INTERNET EXTRA ***

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If you're constantly popping audio CDs in your computer's CD-ROM drive so you can listen to tunes while you work, you'll want to know about the CDDDB. Here, Kevin talks about this unique site and software combination.

=*=*= MUSIC, NONSTOP =*=

This week, we're taking a look at the CDDDB -- that's Compact Disc Database -- a grassroots project that provides information to music lovers. Well, not all music lovers: if you're still hooked on vinyl or don't have a CD-ROM drive in that old IBM PC-XT that you refuse to upgrade, it can't help you. On the other hand, if you have some compact discs and a CD-ROM drive in your computer, I think you'll find this resource rather nifty. The CDDDB is a database of audio compact disc titles and playlists. It contains title, artist, and track information for more than 166,000 discs.

The most useful -- and easiest -- way to use the database is simply to use CD player software which is CDDDB-enabled. You can download a player from the Internet (some are free and some are shareware) and use it in place of the player application that you use now. Once you've installed the software, pop an audio CD into your CD-ROM drive. As it begins to play, the software will query the one of the CDDDB servers on the Net for information about the disc. In a moment, the disc's title, artist and playlist will be appear on your screen.

How does it work? Every audio CD has a (more or less) unique footprint: its table of contents of track timings. The CD player software looks at the number of tracks on your disc and the length of each, and queries the database for information about the disc with those attributes. The server finds the information and quickly returns title, artist and track information. (In rare cases, two different CDs can have the exact same footprint, which can confuse the software.)

So track one is playing, and the software tells you that you're listening to Nirvana or the BeeGees or whatever it is you kids are listening to these days. You want to hear your favorite song but can never remember its track number. This is where the CDDDB shines: since your computer now has a list of the song titles for the disc, you can simply choose from the list the name of the song that you want, and the player will oblige by jumping straight to it.

If the CD that you're listening to isn't in the database, you can enter the information yourself for inclusion. This organic building of the database by its users is part of what makes the CDDDB both charming and expansive. According to the maintainers, about 400 new titles are added every day. I've got some mildly obscure CDs, and tried to stump the database with many of them. It knew about them all.

That's the gist of using the CDDDB with player software. It won't change the world, but it does make listening to your favorite tunes a little more enjoyable. CDDDB players are an excellent model for how friendly Internet applications should work. With them, it is easy to forget that you are using an Internet resource at all. You simply do your thing, and the software quietly finds the information it needs online and delivers it to you. I believe and hope that a growing amount of

software will use the Internet behind-the-scenes to make our lives easier.

A variety of CDDB-compatible players are available for Windows, MacOS, and various flavors of Unix. You can find a list of them all at <http://www.cddb.com/software.html>. For Windows, DiscPlay, CDValet and NotifyCD have received particularly good reviews (of those, NotifyCD is free, the others are shareware). On the Mac, there are two choices: InCDius (free) and TitleTrack (shareware). TitleTrack has more features, but the version I tried, 1.1, was buggy, so I'll stick with InCDius for now.

The CDDB doesn't provide cover art or lyrics. The maintainers of the database cite many valid reasons for these to be excluded, copyright issues being the biggest one.

You can also access information from the CDDB from your web browser at its web site, <http://www.cddb.com>. The site's search engine lets you enter the name of any band and get a list of all the CDs it is featured on -- a fast way to find out about obscure recordings by your favorite artists. The CDDB isn't a commercial venture. They don't sell CDs, and can't help you find a rare one that is listed in their database. For that, they provide links to several online music stores. (If you'd like a recommendation, the only Web music store that I have used is www.cdnnow.com. I was pleased with them.)

Finally, the CDDB site also provides interesting statistics about its use. The server keeps track of what CDs are queried -- that is, every time someone's CD software looks up a title in the database. As a result, the web site can provide listings of the most popular CDs in the past month or year.

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CDDB Server home page: <http://www.cddb.com>

CDDB-compatible player software: <http://www.cddb.com/software.html>

CDNow: <http://www.cdnnow.com>

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The NetAnswers Internet Extra is free to all CompuServe members. It's available in the Internet Community Forum -- GO INETCOM and look in file library 11, "NetAnswers".

Got comments or ideas for future issues? We want to hear 'em. Just send a message to savetz@compuserve.com (74774,2725).

There's a someone that I'm longing to see. I hope that he turns out to be...
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